

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN GIUFFRA:

A CONTRIBUTION TO A SURVEY OF LIFE AND STRUCTURES ON THE COMSTOCK

Interviewee: John Giuffra

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Description

John Giuffra was born in 1911 in American Flat, a small valley to the south of Virginia City, Nevada. His father was employed by the Virginia & Truckee Railroad. When John was three years old, the Giuffra family moved to Virginia City, which has remained his home ever since.

Mr. Giuffra is a graduate of the Fourth Ward School. Following overseas service in the military in World War II, he returned to Virginia City and worked as a heavy equipment operator for a mine in Gold Hill. Eventually this led to a career in construction throughout west-central Nevada.

John Giuffra develops a picture of life in Virginia City over a period of five decades. Of particular interest are his comments on American Flat during the early 1900s, the Virginia City fire of 1942, and the economic revival of the community by tourism in the years following World War II. Inez Solaga, Mr. Giuffra's sister, and Mildred Giuffra, his wife, have also contributed interviews about Virginia City.

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN GIUFFRA

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A CONTRIBUTION TO A SURVEY OF
LIFE AND STRUCTURES ON THE COMSTOCK**

PREPARED FOR THE STOREY COUNTY, NEVADA
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

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An Oral History Conducted by Lucy Scheid
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University of Nevada Oral History Program

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PREFACE TO THE DIGITAL EDITION

Established in 1964, the University of Nevada Oral History Program (UNOHP) explores the remembered past through rigorous oral history interviewing, creating a record for present and future researchers. The program's collection of primary source oral histories is an important body of information about significant events, people, places, and activities in twentieth and twenty-first century Nevada and the West.

The UNOHP wishes to make the information in its oral histories accessible to a broad range of patrons. To achieve this goal, its transcripts must speak with an intelligible voice. However, no type font contains symbols for physical gestures and vocal modulations which are integral parts of verbal communication. When human speech is represented in print, stripped of these signals, the result can be a morass of seemingly tangled syntax and incomplete sentences—totally verbatim transcripts sometimes verge on incoherence. Therefore, this transcript has been lightly edited.

While taking great pains not to alter meaning in any way, the editor may have removed false starts, redundancies, and the “uhs,” “ahs,” and other noises with which speech is often liberally sprinkled; compressed some passages which, in unaltered form, misrepresent the chronicler’s meaning; and relocated some material to place information in its intended context. Laughter is represented with [laughter] at the end of a sentence in which it occurs, and ellipses are used to indicate that a statement has been interrupted or is incomplete...or that there is a pause for dramatic effect.

As with all of our oral histories, while we can vouch for the authenticity of the interviews in the UNOHP collection, we advise readers to keep in mind that these are remembered pasts, and we do not claim that the recollections are entirely free of error. We can state, however, that the transcripts accurately reflect the oral history recordings on which they were based. Accordingly, each transcript should be approached with the

same prudence that the intelligent reader exercises when consulting government records, newspaper accounts, diaries, and other sources of historical information. All statements made here constitute the remembrance or opinions of the individuals who were interviewed, and not the opinions of the UNOHP.

In order to standardize the design of all UNOHP transcripts for the online database, most have been reformatted, a process that was completed in 2012. This document may therefore differ in appearance and pagination from earlier printed versions. Rather than compile entirely new indexes for each volume, the UNOHP has made each transcript fully searchable electronically. If a previous version of this volume existed, its original index has been appended to this document for reference only. A link to the entire catalog can be found online at <http://oralhistory.unr.edu/>.

For more information on the UNOHP or any of its publications, please contact the University of Nevada Oral History Program at Mail Stop 0324, University of Nevada, Reno, NV, 89557-0324 or by calling 775/784-6932.

Alicia Barber
Director, UNOHP
July 2012

ORIGINAL PREFACE

The University of Nevada Oral History Program (OHP) engages in systematic interviewing of persons who can provide firsthand descriptions of events, people and places that give history its substance. The products of this research are the tapes of the interviews and their transcriptions.

In themselves, oral history interviews are not history. However, they often contain valuable primary source material, as useful in the process of historiographical synthesization as the written sources to which historians have customarily turned. Verifying the accuracy of all of the statements made in the course of an interview would require more time and money than the OHP's operating budget permits. The program can vouch that the statements were made, but it cannot attest that they are free of error. Accordingly, oral histories should be read with the same prudence that the reader exercises when consulting government records, newspaper accounts, diaries and other sources of historical information.

It is the policy of the OHP to produce transcripts that are as close to verbatim

as possible, but some alteration of the text is generally both unavoidable and desirable. When human speech is captured in print the result can be a morass of tangled syntax, false starts and incomplete sentences, sometimes verging on incoherency. The type font contains no symbols for the physical gestures and the diverse vocal modulations that are integral parts of communication through speech. Experience shows that totally verbatim transcripts are often totally unreadable and therefore a total waste of the resources expended in their production. While keeping alterations to a minimum the OHP will, in preparing a text:

- a. generally delete false starts, redundancies and the uhs, ahs and other noises with which speech is often liberally sprinkled;
- b. occasionally compress language that would be confusing to the reader in unaltered form;
- c. rarely shift a portion of a transcript to place it in its proper context; and
- d. enclose in [brackets] explanatory information or words that were not uttered

but have been added to render the text intelligible.

There will be readers who prefer to take their oral history straight, without even the minimal editing that occurred in the production of this text; they are directed to the tape recording.

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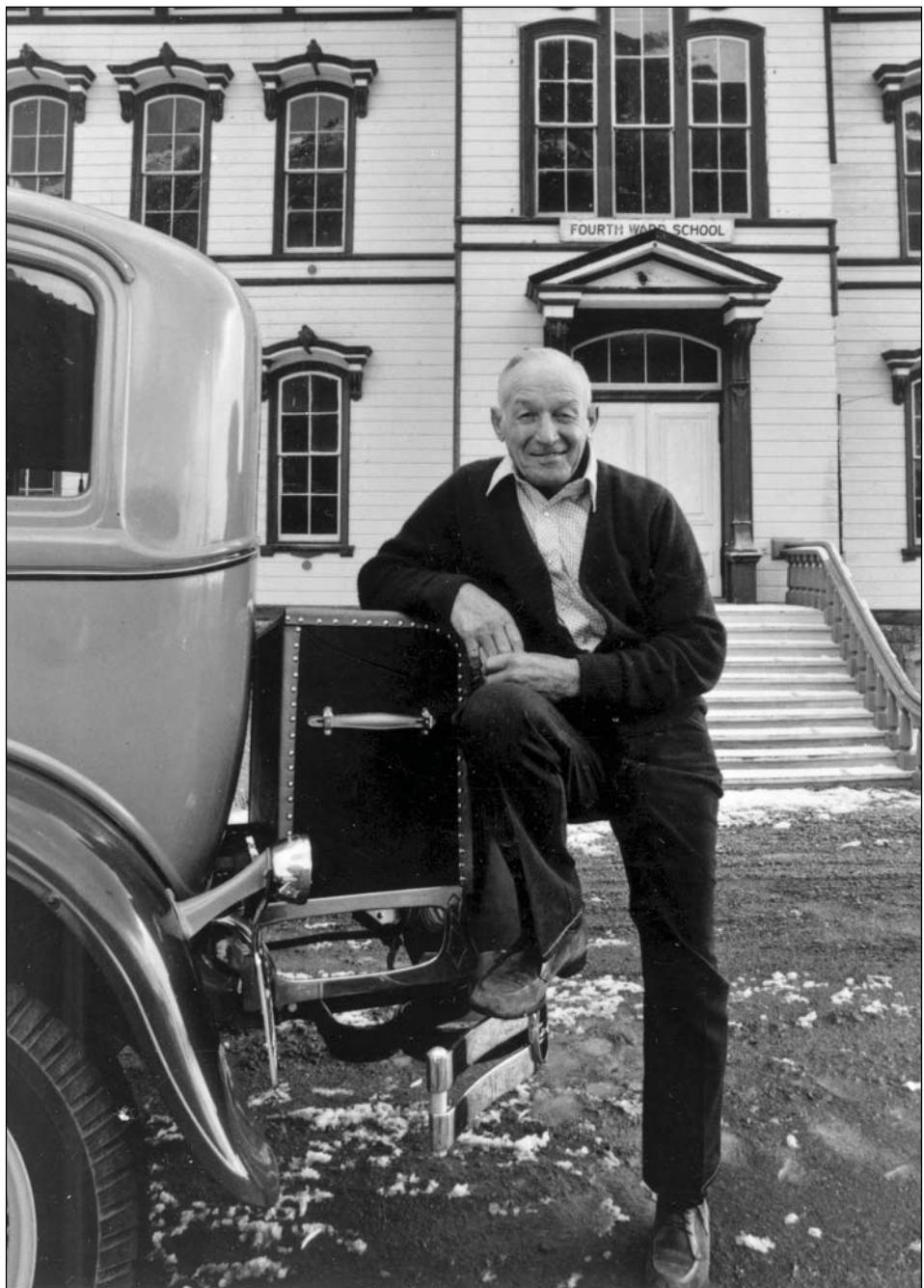
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INTRODUCTION

John Giuffra was born in 1911 in American Flat, a small valley to the south of Virginia City. His father was employed by the Virginia & Truckee Railroad. When John was 3 years old, the Giuffra family moved to Virginia City, which has remained his home ever since.

Mr. Giuffra is a graduate of the Fourth Ward School. Following overseas service in the military during World War II, he returned to Virginia City and took work as a heavy equipment operator for a mine in Gold Hill. Eventually this led to a career in construction throughout west-central Nevada.

In this 1984 interview with Lucy Scheid, Mr. Giuffra develops a picture of life in Virginia City over a period of 5 decades. Of particular interest are his comments on American Flat during the early 1900s, the Virginia City fire of 1942, and the economic revival of the community by tourism in the years following World War II. The reader is advised that Inez Solaga, Mr. Giuffra's sister, has also contributed an interview to this series.



JOHN GIUFFRA
1984

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN GIUFFRA

Lucy Scheid: Where on the Comstock were you born, and what do you remember as a child about that area?

John Giuffra: I was born in American Flat in 1911. I remember some things when I lived there. The only people that lived there were my mother and my father and my brother and another family that worked on the railroad by the name of Nelson. I remember when my mother made ice cream; my dad walked up to the Five Mile reservoir to get some ice, and that was about a mile up the hill and a mile back. So we made ice cream that day! That was on birthdays and things like that.

There was 2 houses and another little cabin [of] another man on the railroad. A little ways further down there were 2 Chinese people, and they had a little farm there about 2 acres; they brought their vegetables up to Virginia City. They had a little horse and wagon and brought the vegetables up here and sold them. My mother was a little bit afraid at times living down there because there were so many hobos walking the

railroad tracks. She would grab me and my brother and run down to the Chinese when she saw [hobos] walking up the track, but they never seemed to bother anybody. They just went along their way and went up to Gold Hill or Virginia City. But there were several of them at different times.

How old were you?

I was about 3 years old.

So there were a lot of men out of work at that time?

Yes. A lot of people out of work, and they were coming from Carson City going to Virginia City. There was 2 Chinese, and we used to go down there and visit. One of them died, and when my mother went down one morning he said, "See what happened?" He used to see his ghosts, and he'd say, "Charlie came to see me last night."

Do you remember the names of the 2 Chinese?

No, I don't remember.

What can you tell me about the chicken ranch at American Flat?

There was a chicken ranch about a half a mile away; Mr. Calver had it. He had about 2,000 chickens, and he brought the eggs and the chickens up to Virginia City to sell.

Your dad worked on the railroad in American Flat?

Dad worked on the railroad in American Flat. We were there 5 years. I have to tell you how we moved up here. We loaded everything on the flatcar on the railroad—our chickens and our cow, the cat and dog. Loaded it on the flatcar and came up to Virginia City. Then we lived right next door here.

Tell me what that house looked like.

It wasn't much of a house—one storey, 5 rooms, I guess. But it was cold in the wintertime.

When was this house built?

About 1870, probably, because they built the schoolhouse [Fourth Ward School] in 1875; they had a scaffolding around it when they were building it, and there's a picture in Bill Marks's crystal Bar. It shows this house already built.

I'll tell you about our dairy. We had a dairy—about 8, 9 cows. We had about 40 customers in Virginia City, and I delivered the milk before I went to school...made the rounds in town.

Where was your dairy located?

Right over here [in back of Inez Solaga's house]. The barn is still there.

You sold the milk in town?

Yes. We sold milk for \$4 a month for a quart.

And your dad was still working on the railroad, and he ran the dairy, too?

Yes. He'd milk the cows, and my mother helped fill and wash the bottles, and I delivered the milk.

How many people were in town at that time?

I guess 200 or 300; there wasn't very many.

Could you describe what a day at school was like?

Well, there were so many different things.

What kinds of games did you play?

Oh, baseball, basketball, track, volleyball. When I was in high school we played football one year. We only had enough players to make a team; we got beat a lot.

Who did you play, and where did you play?

We played Reno one time. And we played Carson City, and we played Dayton, Yerington. There was kind of a level spot down in the center of town, but it was rocky and rough—just dirt. That's where we played. I was [also] on a track team.

Could you describe to me what the inside of the Fourth Ward School looked like when you were going there?

Well, they're huge rooms. Great big high ceilings. You started out on the first floor in first grade; first [and] second grade were on the lower floor. Third, fourth and the rest of the elementary was up on the second floor. High school was on the top floor.

And the gym was on the very top floor?

Yes. They had some printing up there—[a] chemistry lab and mechanical drawing.

That must have been interesting to have the gym on the top floor. Was it noisy? Did you hear people playing basketball?

It was just a practice [court]. They played the games downtown. The National Guard building [had] a great big gym.

And that's where all the games and dances and social things were held?

Yes. Then they tore that building down; it was a beautiful building.

What did it look like?

There was 2 floors—below the street and above. One floor on C Street. They had offices in that buildings too, upstairs. They had a balcony around one end. Then they had seats around the balcony. During the dances...

Inez Solaga: They would sit up there and watch the dances....

...and listen to music. They had bleachers downstairs, too.

Do you remember any of the teachers who you had when you were going to the Fourth Ward School?

I had Miss Somers and Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Park. At high school I had Mrs. Mosbek... in seventh and eighth grade. High school principal was Mr. Morgan, and I had George Gadda.

How many people were in a class, and how many in your graduating class?

Well, grade school probably 15 or 20 in each class. Then when I was going to high school there was 50 students; in my [graduating] class there were 12.

What subjects did you study in high school?

Well, I had Spanish, algebra, geometry, history, English. That's about it.

When you were a teenager, what things did you do? Did you go to dances and social events?

Yes, we had dances and movies.

Oh, where did you see those?

In the National Guard Hall.

What days of the week did they have the movies?

I don't know...3 times a week. Silent movies for a while.

Why do you say for a while? Did they stop showing movies here?

Then they stopped, yes, and they had a long time before they started movies in the Odd Fellows building— where Grandma's Fudge is.

IS: On street level.

Oh, street level. And upstairs was the Odd Fellows Hall?

Well, the Odd Fellows, and then there was the mining offices, too.

Besides dances and movies, what else did you do when you were a teenager?

We played basketball and baseball.

Did you have a car?

Yes. My folks had a car.

Did you picnic in Bowers Mansion? I know they did that earlier in Virginia City.

Yes, when we went to school we went to Bowers for a picnic at the end of the school year.

IS: Swimming or picnicking.

How many people were living here in the 1930s?

Well, during the Depression there were about a couple hundred maybe...200 or 300. There were about 6 people working in town.

What did they do?

Well there was people working on the railroad; people working up the courthouse, and a few working for the water company. That's all there was.

What did everybody else do?

Oh, just waiting for a better time, I guess. It was *really* rough during the Depression. Then it started to get good when Roosevelt got

in in 1934. That's when they started putting people to work again.

What did Roosevelt do for Virginia City?

The mines started up again.

Where did they get their money for food or anything like that?

It was from the government. And then there was a man, George Wilson, had his grocery store here, and he carried a lot of people for a couple of years, I guess. N. C. Prater Company was the name of the store. Some people paid him afterwards and some didn't. But he had enough money to carry these people, and he was good enough to do it. So a lot of people got by that way.

And then in 1934 the mines started again.

Well, 1934 to 1940 there were about 200 miners working here then. When World War II came along the government shut all the mines down and took all the people out! [laughter] It just about cleared Virginia City of whoever was able to go to the service. It took them all.

How many people stayed in Virginia City during the war, and what did they do here?

Couple hundred maybe. I don't know what they did. I wasn't here. I was [going] in the service. And that night the fire caught up here on the Divide; it started about 8:00, 9:00 I guess. It started up about 2 or 3 miles out of town, and in about half an hour it was right up here on the Divide. It started burning up there. Then it kept burning and finally it came over to that pit over here; the fire turned and

went up the hill and went out. The people were getting ready to move from town. But it went up and hit that pole up there, and then it went up the hill and went out.

How many houses burned?

Thirty.

And you were saying earlier that the equipment, the fire-fighting equipment, wasn't very good?

No. I think they had about one old truck.

Where was the water coming from?

It was coming out of the hydrants. But they could never stop it. It just went out.

It wasn't a very good fire company?

It wasn't. One of the firemen came down here with a hose and he threw it off, and he says, "Here's the hose; hook it up to your hydrant." He threw the hose off and then he took off. My brother and mother and my father hooked it up to the hydrant over there and we wet everything down here.

And that's the reason why your house didn't burn down?

It came right across the street here. The house burned right across the street—that didn't last 5 minutes. We wet all the buildings down. You couldn't even put your hand on those buildings; they were so hot. Some houses right down here burned. This was the only one left. Some on this street down below. Then the next day, I went to the service. I didn't even get to sleep. [The next] day I went to get on the train in Reno and went to Virginia [to] boot

camp. When we got to Chicago there were newspapers that [said] Virginia City burned down last night. So I went out to Virginia [to] boot camp there, and then we [went] to California and I was there about 3 weeks I guess. Then I went over to [the] Hawaiian Islands and I was there a year and a half, then I went to Guam and was there a year and a half; I was gone 3 years in the service.

Then you came back to Virginia City?

Yes.

What was it like then, after you came back?

It was different. [laughter] They didn't improve it at all in those 3 years. It was then they started to mine again. They started open-pit mining. I went to work in Gold Hill [in an open pit]. I ran a power shovel there for 3 years.

What did the town look like? Were all the buildings really run-down?

Yes, very run-down! When I came back after 3 years I came around the buildings and I looked up the street. I thought it was terrible. I said I'm never going to live here! [laughter] But then I went to work, and I stayed.

How many people were living here still? How many people came back?

There were a lot of people [that came] back. Then the town started to boom.

Tell me about that. What do you mean?

Right after World War II there was a man by the name of Paul Smith, and he started a

little card shop up town on C Street. That's the way it started.

Was it a casino?

No—post cards. It was in a little building... narrow building

IS: It was next to the Bucket of Blood.

Well, a little card shop and some souvenirs. Then they [tourists] started coming and it just went. Every year it got bigger and bigger. Then Lucius Beebe came here and Chuck Clegg. They wrote books and all. He [Beebe] came from New York. He wrote for the *New York Times* or *New York Sun*—one of the big papers. He came here with Chuck Clegg, and they started the *Territorial Enterprise* again. Then with his name on everything and his advertising.... They had big ads—liquor ads... he knew people in New York and all over the place. They had the circulation up to 2,000 a week, I think. All over the world those papers went. They had about 6 or 7 people working that paper down there.

When did Lucius Beebe arrive?

Early 1950s. They ran the paper about 3 years, I think. [Then] they got tired of it. They didn't quit because they weren't making any money. They didn't need the money anyway.

They were wealthy?

Yes. Millionaires.

Where did he live in town? I know he had a house somewhere.

He lived up there by Piper's Opera House.

So the paper ran for 3 years?

It put Virginia City on the map, I guess, for a while.

why do you say for a while?

Well, while they were here, and then it just went on. Then the people started buying buildings and putting up businesses. They've been building all the time ever since. Now there isn't any more space left. All taken up.

Do you want to go back to the 1920s? I was wondering if you'd tell me who built American Flat. Do you know, do you remember who built it? And how much it was built for?

I understand it was an English company. It was built for 2,000-ton capacity. But it was pretty hard to mine that much ore—2,000 ton a day—but they never did quite get it up to capacity. They were mining underground. They were mining from Gold Hill all the way up to Virginia City, all the different mines. They had a tunnel clear from American Flat clear up to here. They would pull in ore from each one of those mines all the way down, and they still couldn't keep the capacity.

Did American Flat people own all the mines, too?

Yes, it was called United Comstock Mines.

How much did American Flat cost to build?

Nine million dollars at that time.

And it was built in 1920 and it ran till...?

It ran for 3 years, and then silver dropped to 25¢ so they had to quit.

Could you tell me how much gold was at that time, too?

I guess \$22, \$20. I think \$20. Then when President Roosevelt got in they raised the price to \$32, and then it was that for a good many years. Then it went up to \$800 one time.

Were there a lot of WPA [Works Progress Administration] projects up here in Virginia City?

The roads, I think, is about all—Geiger Grade and the truck route.

So most of the people here in town, they didn't work on the WPA projects or anything like that?

A few of them did. Most of them come from out of town though. You know, probably Carson City.

IS: Well, during the war it wasn't hard; people had to have food stamps, wasn't it? Everything was rationed—gasoline, food.

Yes, everything was rationed during the war. Gasoline was rationed. Meat was rationed.

Then your father was still working for the railroad, and he stopped in 1939?

Thirty-nine. Then he went on retirement till he died at the age of 97.

Let's see, so you were a machine operator in Gold Hill after you came back from the war. Then what did you do?

I just followed construction. Worked 25 years, I guess, but I commuted to Reno and Carson and up to Lake Tahoe.

So there wasn't really any work here per se.

Not the kind I needed.

Do you remember the Con-Virginia mine fire at all?

That was in the 1960s. That was a long time ago. Con-Virginia?

Yes. There was one in 1939, too. I was wondering if anybody remembered that.

No.

Tell me about your dad pulling up the Crown Point tracks.

Let's see, what was the year of that? [In] 1937 the railroad closed up here from Carson City to Virginia City. So they took up all the tracks and there was a big trestle in Gold Hill—that wooden trestle? It was about 200 feet high, I guess, and 300 or 400 feet long across the canyon—all wood timbers. So they dismantled that for salvage, I guess.

What was Gold Hill like at that time? What did it look like? Were there any houses there?

A few. Not very many.

Tell me about this pedicycle that your folks owned.

When we were kids we rode it up and around the track.

Describe to me what it looked like.

Well it had spoke wheels—4 spoke wheels—and it was built like a bicycle.. .like 2 bicycles only tied together. And you pumped

with your feet on railroad tracks. It had handle bars on it; you didn't have to steer it, but they were still there.

Your mother used to ride that to get groceries you said?

IS: To see her friend Mrs. Nelson.

Mrs. Nelson. My mother rode this thing from American Flat up to Gold Hill to shop and get the mail.

In the 1930s where'd you go for groceries?

N. C. Prater. There was 2 stores.

And how many hotels or motels?

IS: Let's see, there was the Virginia Hotel.

Silver Dollar Hotel. Fewer rooms in some of the older ones. Not very many. The motels were built after the war.

To accommodate the tourists?

Yes.

Why do you think it became a tourist attraction?

Just the history of it.

I'd heard a rumor [that] in the 1930s there was a man who was burning down buildings. Do you remember anything about that?

I don't think so; I never heard of it.

IS: I know they tore down a lot of buildings, but not burned them.

During the Depression people bought old homes for firewood for the winter. You could buy a house for \$75. They'd burn it—use it for firewood.

I also heard that some houses were moved away—just carted off and moved down to Los Angeles. Do you remember anything about that?

There was some moved, but I don't know where they went to. The whole town was rundown; there's been a lot of restoration here. That Savage Mansion over there used to...the porches [had] all fallen down. You wouldn't believe what it looked like before they restored it.

Who lives there?

IS: Oscar Lewis.

They didn't know what the town was going to be like. They let everything go because everybody really thought the town was finished. Then the tourists started coming. People started restoring their homes. See, that's 40 years ago—after the war till now.

When did the population go back up?

It's up around 700 now.

When did they start coming?

Right after World War II when it started, when the tourists started coming. Some people started businesses and [when] they sold them somebody else bought it.

When did the artists start moving in?

About the same time. The county hospital [St. Mary's Hospital] down here is an art center now. There's a different instructor comes every week, every 2 weeks.

How long has that been an arts center?

Ten or 15 years. It was empty for a long, long time. It belonged to the county. [It has] 20 [or] 22 rooms in there.

Did they restore it? It looks great now.

They've done a lot of work there. They rewired it and everything. Nice grounds.

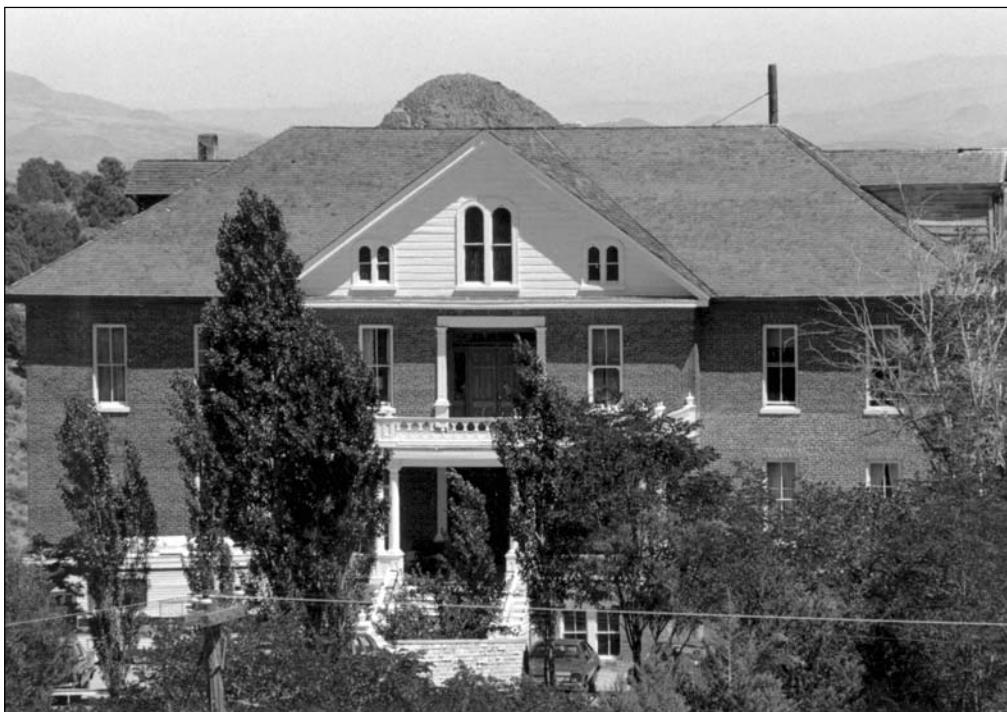
Are you retired?

I'm retired. I worked for the county for 10 years. I've been retired for about 5 years.

PHOTOGRAPHS



“The American Flat cyanide mill, built in 1920, ran for 3 years, and then silver dropped to \$.25 so they had to quit.”



“The county hospital down here is an art center now.”

Photographs by N.J. Broughton

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